Volunteers help JFS expand services through new Kesher KC program

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Jewish Family Services has created an additional opportunity for volunteers as part of the new Kesher KC program. They will play a key role in helping JFS reach more people and increase the positive impact of Kesher KC. Volunteers are invited to join this new JFS program.

Kelly Somberg and fellow volunteer Lois Rice (pictured right) are leading the charge as Kesher KC Resource volunteers. This “dynamic duo” have been involved since November as part of a pilot program that is growing to engage more clients in Missouri and eventually Kansas.

In their role, as Resource Center volunteers, Somberg and Rice serve as a welcoming face and the first people that families connect with when they walk in the door. Resource Center volunteers meet with families to identify needs and opportunities, provide information and referrals to agency and community resources, and link families with immediate or complicated needs with an on-site social worker for further assessment and support.

“We want to know their story and what their needs are,” Somberg said. We do a brief description of what we offer and what we can provide at JFS. We also make community connections by sharing a resource center of information from other organizations that may be able to assist them with services that JFS does not provide.”

“While we help them through the paper work, we want to know about other situations in their lives that we can possibly help with,” Rice said. “While listening, I’m thinking of what connections we can make with them and share this with one of JFS’ social work staff.”

Whether it’s combating food insecurity, employment issues, affordable housing, counseling needs or other issues, the client now has a team working to help them in a very personal, caring way. And from that initial meeting, a client walks away with food for themselves and their family.

After the initial appointment, the client comes back monthly on Kesher KC Fridays — the first and third of each month — to do their shopping and check back in with the JFS team to make sure everything is going smoothly for them. If those days don’t work, other arrangements can be made.

JoEllen Wurth recently joined the Resource Center volunteer team. Wurth, who spent her professional career in social services, strongly believes in this integrated approach to serving clients.

“If someone is coming here for food, there is likely to be other things going on,” Wurth said. “By opening doors for them to what we offer and providing resources for them, this is the best possible way to work with people in need.”

Kesher KC Resource Center volunteers are critical to the program’s success. JFS is recruiting more volunteers to join Somberg, Rice and Wurth. JFS is looking for people who are comfortable sitting one-on-one listening to a client story and working in a team setting to find solutions for them. Resource Center volunteers receive hands-on training and ongoing JFS staff support and consultation. Anyone interested in becoming a Kesher KC Resource Center volunteer should email Taly Friedman, JFS director of volunteer engagement, at volunteer@jfskc.org.

(Continue on back)
Jewish Family Services’ Kesher KC integrates and builds on the success of its food pantry, social work and employment services. Kesher means connection in Hebrew, and it is the spirit of connection that defines the program. Program goals include:

- **Connecting and engaging** meaningfully with individuals and families challenged by food, housing and financial insecurity;
- **Connecting and linking** individuals and families with the resources and services they want and need;
- **Connecting staff and volunteers** to bring coordinated, affirming services to life.

Kesher KC provides easy access to a range of on-site services centered on the food pantry, a primary access point for families struggling to meet basic needs. Kesher KC focuses on meeting the immediate needs of participating families and moves them toward a more secure future in an integrated manner. The program provides low-barrier access with welcoming and friendly engagement for individuals and families seeking assistance from JFS. Kesher KC also serves as a resource for services that JFS doesn’t provide but other community partners do.

At the heart of Kesher KC is the pantry-based availability of specially trained volunteers, social workers, employment coaches, and community resource partners engaging and linking families with services and resources. When families schedule service, they are offered flexible appointment windows. This is more convenient than a fixed appointment, particularly to those who use public transportation or get rides from friends or family. Minimal, streamlined paperwork and eligibility processes lower barriers and provide a friendlier, more accessible service experience.

All new families are screened by a resource center volunteer to identify needs and opportunities, and provide information and referral to agency and community resources. These volunteers link families with immediate or complicated needs with the on-site social worker for further assessment and support.

Social workers provide case management services helping individuals and families access or maintain safe, adequate and affordable housing. They also help families enroll in public income supports, provide help with spending plans or links to financial coaching and education; and provide ongoing problem-solving support and encouragement. The pantry-based social worker becomes a familiar and friendly resource providing services to each family for as long as it is beneficial.

Another aspect to Kesher KC is on-site employment coaching; for those already in the workforce, there is help exploring employment opportunities that provide livable wages.

Kesher KC also invites various community partners onsite to provide connection to services such as financial education, health education and screenings, benefits enrollment, voter registration, nutrition and cooking classes.

For more information about Kesher KC, contact Maggie Haghirian, JFS Food and Shelter program director, at mhaghirian@jfskc.org or call 913-730-1750.

Somberg has found her experience rewarding. “What was appealing to me was having that personal and deeper connection with our clients,” she said. “As a board member, I really believe in this model and better integrating our social work services. Instead of just putting out fires, we are trying to have a wrap-around holistic approach.”

Rice added, “As a volunteer it makes you feel that you’re part of the team here. What comes out every single time is how much resilience and capacity JFS has to improve people’s lives. It is usually a very positive experience.”